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Certification of Organic Products: The Guarantee Needed for Access to International Markets

INTRODUCTION

All organic products currently commercialized on international markets, must be certified as "organic" by an independent certifying agency, to be considered as such.



Organic product marketing, in its initial stages, allowed direct contact between the grower and the consumer, thus a relationship of trust was established with regard to the organic integrity of the product. As other, less personalized, points of sale came into being, this direct link was lost, and it became necessary for an independent third party to guarantee for the consumer that organic production standards were met. Thus, in the mid-sixties and the beginning of the seventies, organic product certification started in Germany and the United States.

At the start, the certification agencies were created principally by the Organic Farmers and Consumers Associations themselves, which defined the standards together, as well as the certification system itself. The final certification decision corresponded to Certification Committees made up, for the most part, of interested growers and consumers desirous of establishing guarantee systems for healthier production and foods.

Many of these agencies consolidated a strong market position, with examples such as OCIA (Organic Crop Improvement Association,), CCOF (California Certified Organic Farmers,), and the OTCO (Oregon Tilth Certification Office), as well as in Europe with Naturland, Demeter, Soil Association, etc. Currently, there are numerous private certification agencies or federal or state governmental entities, as is the case in some states in the United States.

This article reviews the principles and standards that govern organic certification, the components involved in the process, the stages required, the supporting documentation that must be supplied, as well as aspects related to the certification of organized groups of growers.

It is important to keep in mind, that the organic certification system is relatively new; as such, it is a process that is undergoing modifications on a day to day basis, according to local and world needs.

ORGANIC PRODUCTION STANDARDS

At first, Organic Production Standards were established by the growers and consumers that made up the first organic growers associations, who established certification agencies in their associations. Since they were established by growers and consumers, both sectors were aware of the need to reduce any negative environmental impact from agriculture, but also respectful of the practical limitations in all productive systems, the standards became an equilibrium point between the ideal, no-impact conditions sought by the consumer, and the practical productive vision of the farmer or food processor.

With the growth of organic activities around the world, the regulations initially established by growers in different regions of the United States and Europe began to be homogenized at the international level. In 1989, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM,) established the Basic Standards for Organic Production, which were used as the basis for later developments in national and international legislation.

In 1991, the European Union established international legislation in Organic Agriculture (EEC No. 2092/91), which regulates all member countries and all those countries that wish to export organic products to the EU. In addition, in 1991, the United States developed the Organic Food Production Act, whose operational regulations were accepted in February 2001, and which will go into effect in July 2002. Finally, the Codex Alimentarius also established the Basic Standards for Organic Production, which doubtless will be very useful in cases of international litigation.

The standards are divided into three basic areas: crop production, animal husbandry, and food processing. They are general standards for a majority of agricultural activities; however, there are specific regulations for some activities such as apiculture, textiles, and shrimp harvesting, among others. The Manuals for a majority of the agencies also include lists of the inputs allowed for each of these activities.

Although there are variations among the standards for each country, as well as among the different certifying agencies, there are basic concepts that are common to all the agencies and legislations:

1. Soil and farm management with a long-term view, protecting the soil against erosion, maintaining its biological activity and its viability, etc.
2. Biodiversity is to be fostered in the productive system and the surroundings.
3. Keep the farm animals under optimum conditions of feeding and housing.
4. Recycle plant or animal materials to return nutrients to the soil and minimize the use of non-renewable materials.
5. Promote responsible use of the soil, water, and air, and minimize contamination of these resources
6. Use no agro-chemical on the farm at least 36 months prior to the harvest, and avoid contamination that the application of agro-chemicals on neighboring conventional farms might cause to the organic crops in development.
7. Water: water and water source management are important. This resource must be cared for at the farm level.
8. Contamination: the productive process and processing must be non-contaminating for the environment. For example, agro-industrial waste must not contaminate water sources.
9. Documentation to back up the process; the necessary documentation must be available to allow certification of the farm or processing plant activities.

COMPONENTS OF THE CERTIFICATION PROCESS

There are variations among the certification systems in different countries, although in general they all have the same basic components:

Food or Textile Grower or Processor

The grower interested in entering the activity and who has applied organic production standards for at least three years prior to this harvest, and who intends to market it with an organic certification. Alternatively, a foodstuff processor who, applying these standards in his/her processing plant, is also interested in selling his/her product as organic.

Certifying Agency

The Certifying Agency may be state, private, or not-for-profit, as is the case with the Organic Growers or Consumer Associations.

The Certifying Agency usually has office personnel to coordinate the certification process. They may have in-house inspectors or they contract the services of an external inspector to carry out farm visits. The final decision on whether the grower is certified or not, will be taken by a Certification Committee. The composition of this committee will vary according to the agencies. In cases such as OCIA and OTCO, this committee should be made up of representatives of the different areas of interest, such as consumers, growers, marketers, etc.

Inspector

The inspector is the person in charge of visiting the farm or processing plant, verifying the information presented by the grower on the application for certification, establish direct contact between the Agency and the grower, and present a report to the Agency. The information compiled by the inspector will be used as a basic criterion for the Certification Committees decision. **The inspector makes no certification decisions.** The Independent Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA,), which began to group inspectors in the United States and Canada in 1989, currently unites inspectors from throughout the world; it specializes in training to standardize the inspection process among the different certification agencies throughout the world.

STAGES IN THE CERTIFICATION PROCESS

When the purchaser observes the agency seal on the back of an organically certified product label, he/she has the guarantee that each step taken by the product, from farm to table, was reviewed and that it met the certification standards of that Agency.

Therefore, it is necessary to inspect and certify each step: starting with the seed, the planting, field management, harvesting, storage, transportation, processing if there is any, through final packaging. In the case of raw materials that are imported from a third country, the documentation flows from one country to another, sometimes in the same agency, or some times among agencies, to guarantee a review of the whole process. For example, the sugar produced in Paraguay and used to prepare chocolate in Germany must be inspected on the farm, in the sugar mill, on packing for export, and then it will be inspected in the plant where it is converted into chocolate in Germany.

Here below we briefly describe the steps necessary to achieve certification of an organic product at the level of the farm and the processing plant

Step 1. Contact with the Certification Agency

The grower must contact the Certification Agency with which he/she wishes to work. The selection criteria for the Agency are frequently determined by the purchaser of the product and his/her market requirements.

The Agency forwards a questionnaire to the grower. It is designed to gather information on current farm management and its history. This questionnaire is filled out and returned to the Agency. Based on this information, the Agency will decide whether the grower has complied with the basic steps for organic certification and if so, will send an inspector to scrutinize the farm.

Step 2. Farm Inspection

The inspector assigned contacts the grower and carries out an inspection of the physical installations and areas under cultivation, inspecting, verifying, and reporting his/her field observations to the Certifying Agency.

Step 3. Decision Making

The Certification Committee compiles the information available on the grower, the initial questionnaire, inspector's report, photographs, etc. Based on this information a decision is made on the farm's status. The options are: certification denied, accepted, or accepted with conditions. If the certification is denied, the grower still has the opportunity to appeal the decision, in which case it will be reviewed. If the certification is granted with conditions, their compliance will be reviewed by the Agency, once the conditions have been met by the grower, which usually happens during the first year after reception of notification.

Step 4. Use of an Organic Seal

The grower is informed on the final decision. If the application is approved, the grower may begin to market his/her product with the Agency's seal or the certification number granted by the Agency.

IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTATION FOR THE CERTIFICATION



The guarantee granted to the consumer that the product has been revised from soil preparation through final packaging must be backed up by documentation of the whole process. This has been, perhaps, one of the most difficult requirements for small farmers in Latin America, who are not accustomed to keeping precise field accounting. However, it is a topic that has been strengthened by the Latin American inspectors and the Certification Agencies, to explain the importance of these requirements to the growers and the Growers Associations.

The necessary documents for the certification process are those that allow the inspector to have an idea of the global management of the farm and that allow tracing the product from the shelf at the point of sale back to the plot where it was harvested. In some cases, it is not possible to obtain precise documentation tracing back to the precise plot where the product was harvested, due to the different forms of crop and harvest management. An example of this is Costa Rican coffee, where the daily harvest from different farms is processed together. At the end of the process, it would be impossible to disaggregate the information on which coffee came from which farm. On the other hand, in countries where the wet processing is carried out on the farm, and what is stored are sacks of coffee in "pergamino" (un-roasted beans), which are easily labeled, it is possible to achieve a better system of tracing the final product back to the farm.

NECESSARY DOCUMENTS FOR CERTIFICATION

There is no exact list of the documents that are indispensable for each step in the process, since each situation is unique. In each case, it is common for the organic product grower or processor to have developed a system, frequently very ingenious, to carry his field accounting. However, it is possible to provide a brief list of the Activities that are important to document.

Farm

1. Manpower: number of individuals working on the farm.
2. Activities carried out on the farm: a ledger or notebook on the activities: such as planting, banking up, pruning, weeding, etc.
3. Inputs: list of the inputs used, labels from these inputs, purchase invoices for these inputs.

Harvest

1. Quantities harvested: some type of information at the level of the farm for quantities harvested, whether this be by number of boxes, or by weight, weigh scale tickets, etc.

Transportation

1. Transportation waybills
2. Contracts with the carrier. Internal records on carrier cleanliness.

Storage

1. Inventory or documentation that verifies the arrival and departure of the product from the storage point.

Processing plants

In general, the processing plants in Latin America have fairly complete documentation of their activities. The required documentation will verify the arrival and departure of the product, equipment cleanliness, recipes, personnel, pest control programs, hygiene, etc.

CERTIFICATION BY ORGANIZED GROUPS OF GROWERS

The certification agencies, aware of the high cost implied by certification for small farmers, have created a certification system for "organized small growers". There are some requirements that the group must meet in order to be able to establish a group of this type.

Basic Elements for Community Groups

1. Geographic proximity: all of the growers must be situated within the same community.
2. The crops and agricultural practices must be similar: for the inspection to be carried out by sampling, the growers must have similar crop management practices.
3. Central administration: there must be a single individual acting as contact with the certifying agency, who will handle all of the relevant information. This person, whether physical or corporate, must exercise some type of control over the activities of the group with regard to meeting the certification standards.
4. Internal control system: the community or group of growers should have an internal control system for its activities; given that the inspection is carried out once a year, the internal control is what will really guarantee the proper operation of the system. The inspector will review the internal control system established and verify its efficiency.
5. Education program: to guarantee that all members understand the standards for organic production and how they are applied on his or her farm.
6. Centralized marketing systems and installations: in order to establish a control system over product marketing.

Information that a community group must present for certification

1. General map indicating the production zone.
2. More detailed map showing the location of each farm
3. List of the growers in each community, specifying:
 - o Grower's name
 - o Grower's code
 - o Farm size
 - o Yields
4. Map of each one of the growers' plots.
5. Questionnaire or application for certification.
6. Person or persons acting as contact.

Inspection of Community Groups

The greatest reduction in cost in this type of certification occurs in inspection, since a visit is made to a sample of the growers and not all of them. The sample usually runs between 5% and 20%, depending on the agency and the region. This acceptance of the reduction in inspections is possible if the Internal Control System can guarantee that it has followed up all of the growers throughout the year. The inspector, when reviewing a group of growers, fulfills his/her function as inspector of the production system, but must also revise the operation of the Group's Internal Control System

ACCREDITATION OF THE CERTIFYING AGENCY

After the birth of the first Certification Agencies, and due to increased organic product marketing, the number of Agencies throughout the world has multiplied. By 1996, most Latin American countries had at least one agency at the national level. For example, Mayacert in Guatemala, Argencert, OIA, and Ambiental in Argentina, Eco-Lógica and AIMCOPOP in Costa Rica.

This growth in the number of agencies made it necessary to seek uniformity in the certification processes and organic production standards, which led to the birth of national and international entities to accredit the Certifying Agencies

The most common current accreditation is ISO 65, for general certification agencies. Furthermore, national legislation (Europe, United States, Japan, Costa Rica, etc.) requires that the agencies be accredited before their respective governments to be able to operate. This has allowed a regulation of the activities of the certifying agencies, but increases the operating costs of the agencies, due to the cost implied by each one of these accreditations. Perhaps it would be useful to create a single accreditation system endorsed by all of the governments, to reduce costs.

This has been one of the proposals of IFOAM. This Federation has created a non-governmental accreditation office especially for agencies that certify organic production. The International Organic Accreditation System (IOAS) currently has 27 certified agencies. Recognition by all governments of this certification scheme would allow it, by being the sole worldwide accrediting entity, to reduce accreditation costs, which in the end always fall on the party paying for the certification, the grower.

FINAL COMMENTS

Certification is a necessary process for marketing organic products. It must simplify marketing and enhance the organic movement, and not be an obstacle to the productive process.

It is important for all the participants in the process to be aware of this, to make the certification process fluid and effective. Certification should not, under any circumstance, become a yoke for the grower, rather a service to enhance the development of world organic production.

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